

# A Pedagogy of Provocation: Teaching *Troubling Women's Studies*

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the 2004 publication, *Troubling Women's Studies: Pasts, Presents and Possibilities*. In 2005, a colleague and I used *Troubling Women's Studies* in our graduate feminist theory course, and this analysis highlights student responses to the book with a particular focus on epistemology, pedagogy and identity. My rationale for making the book central is that when students study *Troubling Women's Studies*, they often confront their expectations of the discipline which has perhaps been idealized by them. Through questioning not only the power, but also the limitations, of foundational narratives in women's studies, it is possible that one might undergo a loss of attachment (or at least a critical encounter with an attachment that may engender a loss). In this regard, I reflect upon how the work of teaching and learning *Troubling Women's Studies* produces such losses and can be productive for re-animating the field.

## Résumé

Cet article porte sur la publication de *Troubling Women's Studies: Pasts, Presents and Possibilities*, en 2004. En 2005, un collègue et moi avons utilisé *Troubling Women's Studies* dans notre cours gradué sur la théorie féministe, et cette analyse met en évidence les réponses estudiantines sur le livre, avec une attention particulière sur l'épistémologie, la pédagogie et l'identité. J'ai voulu rendre le livre central au cours, car

lorsque les étudiants étudient *Troubling Women's Studies*, ils sont souvent confrontés à leurs attentes sur la discipline qu'ils ont peut-être idéalisée. En questionnant non seulement le pouvoir, mais aussi les limites des narratives fondamentales en études sur les femmes, il est possible de perdre son attache (ou du moins confronter une attache pouvant potentiellement résulter en une perte). À cet égard, je réfléchis à la manière dont le travail d'enseignement et d'apprentissage de *Troubling Women's Studies* produit de telles pertes et peut être productif à la réanimation de la discipline.

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...such anxieties and losses cannot be ignored, glossed over or wished away. What comes from facing such losses is not defined...but remains open, complicated and situated for all of us.

(Braithwaite et al. 2004, 14–15)

## Introduction

This article focuses on the 2004 publication *Troubling Women's Studies: Pasts, Presents and Possibilities*, by Ann Braithwaite, Susan Heald, Susanne Luhmann, and Sharon Rosenberg, and its pedagogical place in my teaching. The authors, both collectively and individually, respond to what remain current “troubles” in women's studies by articulating some new ways of imagining how the field might get “passed on” to an upcoming generation of practitioners and students through questioning some of the theoretical foundations—of epistemology, identity, pedagogy—that have structured the field. Broadly, they argue for the need to face the losses that accompany the faltering foundations and truth narratives that continue to frame the discipline.

*Troubling Women's Studies* highlights the need for continued interrogation of and grappling with the effects of foundational logic. Specifically, Braithwaite (2004) analyzes

autobiographical accounts, what she calls “origin stories” (105), which have laid the bedrock of women’s studies in Canada. She calls for a “doubling-back” (98), a reflexive and analytic critique of these origin stories and what they tell us about women’s studies now. Without such doubling back, she suggests, there is risk of foreclosing on all of the complexity and multiplicity of/in the discipline. Likewise, critiquing individualism and power relations that often characterize learning in the university setting, Heald (2004) calls for the use of autobiography and reflexivity in teaching as a way for women’s studies to “interrupt” the creation of the liberal-humanist subject that gets produced when one definitive and fixed history of women’s studies is “passed on” (45). There is nothing about autobiography that necessarily interrupts the liberal-humanist subject, but when a critique of knowledge-making practices and pedagogy is enacted through autobiography, our attachments and investments in ways of knowing and teaching become more clear and set the stage for the possibility of ambivalent relations. In this light, Luhmann’s essay (2004) explores the ambivalent attachments that many teachers and students have to women’s studies. She suggests that ambivalence is a way out of a melancholic attachment to a singular and fixed history of women’s studies insofar as it can tolerate both love for the field and continuous critique (187).

In her essay, Rosenberg (2004) proposes that loss can be a powerful site of learning by exploring feminist dilemmas in memorializing the Montreal massacre for insight into how losses might be confronted and grappled with in women’s studies. As a method of inquiry into facing loss, Rosenberg draws on the theories of Irit Rogoff’s “looking away” and Patti Lather’s “getting lost” to encounter and face the demands of loss in women’s studies. “Looking away” and “getting lost” introduce “a hesitancy to knowledge, for knowledges ‘stumble’ rather than purport to build (from) steady ground” (210). Rosenberg captures the texture of Rogoff’s theory as follows:

[In] ‘looking away’... [one will] divert their attention from already constituted and stabilized categories of inquiry. As I understand her, Rogoff is not arguing that looking away is an end in and of itself, but that in looking away and finding one’s gaze caught elsewhere, there are fleeting and contingent possibilities for reinvigorating [women’s studies]. (210)

Rosenberg adds that a looking away also necessitates a turning back to look anew, perhaps this time “with a gaze at least somewhat unhinged from prior stabilities” (210). “Getting lost” also suggests a hesitancy to knowledges. As Rosenberg suggests, instead of striving for control, certainty, and fixedness, what is compelling is how “getting lost” might “both produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (Lather in Rosenberg, 211).

I realized the importance of the themes of epistemology, pedagogy, identity, and ambivalence examined in *Troubling Women’s Studies*, when, in 2006, a colleague and I assigned it in its entirety for a feminist theory graduate seminar. My rationale for making the book central in this article is that when students study the book, they often confront their expectations of a discipline which they have perhaps idealized because of their experiences of having had to “know” it in certain ways, and having succeeded at these ways of “knowing.” In the process of questioning what they believe to be knowledge, and why, some come to realize that the ideals they may have attributed to women’s studies—transformation, empowerment, unity—are just that, abstractions by which women’s studies has defined goals and values, even if not as overtly these days. Recognizing not only the power, but also the limitations, of such abstractions can be felt as a loss. To put it another way, through questioning not only the power, but also the limitations of, foundational narratives in women’s studies, some students undergo a loss of attachment (or at least a critical encounter with an attachment that may engender a loss).

In this paper, I argue that both teachers and students need *Troubling Women’s Studies* because it creates a context for mourning losses of many kinds. Facing attachment to

foundations and acknowledging the felt effects of the loss of certainty and stability that those foundations enable, can provide the grounds on which teachers and students remake relations with self and others. Discussing the book with graduate students opens up a conversation, often suppressed in the academy, about loss: how we live with it and talk about it. The book provides a critique of knowledge-making practices in women's studies and, especially, it adds content to our understandings of how subjects are made.

### Foundations in Women's Studies

Foundations are ubiquitous in all projects of education and they work in subtle and nuanced ways at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. One common theme that links most of my teaching experiences in women's studies has to do with students' insistence (whether overt or implied) on a tidy and unified field of study into which they can sink their teeth. Recently, for example, a colleague in women's studies recounted to me a story about a student who, after realizing that he had too many electives on his schedule for the term, was going to have to drop her class. He said: "Unfortunately, I cannot afford to take a class just for the sake of learning." This might be seen as an example of the ways that many students enter a course with the expectation that they will leave with something, some new knowledge, something that will help them "go further," "progress," enter the work force. There is little to no expectation on the students' part that they might be surprised by their encounter with knowledge, that they may learn something surprising about themselves and the world around them. However, this particular student's response could mean other things: "I have heard that in this course I'll have to unpack my soul in class and I won't do that"; "I am not taking a course that makes me question everything I have learned for the last four years—if it wasn't useful for my future why was I learning it in the first place, and paying for it?" Implicit in such comments is that unlearning and questioning has nothing to do with learning whatsoever.

Another example of foundational logic in women's studies has to do with the category

"woman." While there has been continued debate about and dismantling of the foundational category "woman" in women's studies, the logic remains intact at a deep institutional level in particular ways. While there certainly are exceptions, women's studies has been instrumental in producing the idea that women's interests can be represented by one single and unified movement based on a fixed notion of "woman." Consider the ways that various programs and departments across the country advertise women's studies: "learn about women and work, women and health, women and...." This representational practice works at multiple levels, through departments and programs in the university, and through other media, including prominent feminist journals in Canada. For example, the May 2009 issue of Inanna Publications Newsletter starts by promoting the very popular journal *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* with this statement:

For over 30 years, thousands of women have been reading the *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* to make sure they know about all the work that's being done on women's issues, in Canada and around the world. Because you are involved and concerned about women and women's issues, you have seen us grow and expand throughout the years, continuing to broaden our vision and tackle issues which are of real concern to Canadian women.

While you are familiar with our journal, you may not be aware of our growth as a feminist press, committed to publishing the finest feminist writing. We bring new innovative and diverse perspectives with the potential to change and enhance women's lives everywhere, by academics and community workers, by well known feminists and by emerging young women writers. ("2009 Academic Catalogue" 2009)

*Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* has produced countless issues in which scholars take up a multitude of diverse topics in the realm of feminist scholarship, some invariably contested. Still, the above representation of the journal does not adequately represent the contents of the journal. Instead, the newsletter assumes its readership and their

interests on the basis of what is a seemingly fixed notion of “woman.” All of this is to suggest that while the broad and varying scholarship and debate that goes on in the name of women’s studies is vibrant, exciting, and far-reaching, the traces of foundational logic in the field remain, and call for a continued interrogation of attachment to and investment in that logic.

### **A Theory of Loss Ethics**

To explore and to talk about facing losses in women’s studies is to open the psychic and social mechanisms through which these losses are engaged. What is gained from this exploration is an attending to the ways that foundations construct knowledge, identity, and pedagogy that have the potential to de-humanize. To specifically highlight why I link loss and mourning with teaching and learning in women’s studies, I focus on melancholic attachment as one aspect of engagement with loss that is productive in terms of illuminating the ties that bind us to particular attachments and investments in the field.

In his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Sigmund Freud begins a meditation on the manner in which the human psyche deals with loss through reflections on the meaning of mourning and melancholia. He identifies mourning as the natural progression through loss of a loved one, lost ideals, a lost sense of self, a place or object whereby one withdraws libidinal energy from one object in order to allow for healthy attachment to new objects. Mourning is a finite process. In contrast, melancholia, though sharing many of the surface characteristics of mourning, is identified by Freud as a pathological illness, marked by an inability to recover from the loss, where one is unable to let go of the lost object, preventing healthy attachment to new objects. For Freud, the difference between mourning and melancholia is that in melancholia, the work of working through loss is never done. As Freud suggested, one way to view the affective state of melancholia is to say that it does not allow for an exploration of attachment to ideals.

Contemporary scholars concerned with loss and mourning have delved more deeply

into melancholic attachments to loss, to de-pathologize this stuck place of melancholia, exposing its political and social aspects and possibilities. For instance, Eng and Kazanjian (2003) reread Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholy. Rather than read melancholy as a pathologized or unfinished version of mourning, they suggest that the lack of closure and the holding on to the past that characterize melancholy can be a resource for cultural change. Eng and Kazanjian argue for a notion of melancholia which is hopeful, one which signals an ongoing and open relation with the past (versus a grasping of a fixed past). On these terms, melancholia might be seen as a “continuous engagement with loss and its remains” (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 4).

Melancholia, framed by Eng and Kazanjian’s approach as looking to what remains, can be productive in relation to women’s studies. Struggling with the effects of loss of foundations that were constitutive of subjectivity in the first place might be seen as a sign of opening and working through. As such, we might see melancholia as a resource for change. A part of depathologizing melancholic attachment in women’s studies is to open the possibilities for understanding it not as a sickness that needs to be cured, but as felt experience that can be mobilized in a range of directions.

### **Context for Using *Troubling Women’s Studies: Pasts, Presents and Possibilities***

In the winter semester of 2006, a colleague and I co-taught a women’s studies Master’s-level class in feminist theory. There were eight students in the seminar—all of them were graduate students in women’s studies except for one who was a graduate student in history with a feminist theory background. In the graduate seminar, we explored issues of representation, identity, and politics as they relate to media and cultural practices. The course was theoretically located within feminist cultural and media studies as they intersect with other key contemporary theories, such as queer theory, critical race theory, and disability studies. Themes included an introduction to feminist cultural studies; culture, consumption, and difference; photography and representation;

urbanscapes as cultural practices; and nation, place, and diaspora. We read bell hooks, Angela McRobbie, Judith Butler, Anne McClintock, Janice Radway, Ann Cvetkovich, Clare Whatling, Ann DuCille, Carol Mavor, Stuart Hall, Ien Ang, Trinh Minh-ha, Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty, and *Troubling Women's Studies*. This syllabus structure was meant to offer students the opportunity to engage with feminist cultural studies scholars who have led the way in offering critiques of essentialism, knowledge production, and subjectivity.

Students were required to purchase *Troubling Women's Studies* at the beginning of the semester and to read it within the first six weeks of the course. In the seventh week we conducted a three-hour seminar in which students presented their responses to the book in written and/or other representational forms. Some wrote academic papers; some included collage, journal entries, video, or poetry. The reading project was designed to provide students with an opportunity to explore issues of representation, identity, politics, and belonging in women's studies.

By the third week in the semester my colleague and I began to ask students how their reading of *Troubling Women's Studies* was coming along and how they were experiencing the book thus far. At this point, responses ranged from "I find it boring" and "I feel like the authors are waving their fingers at me, telling me what to think and what kinds of pedagogies are the 'right' kinds of pedagogies," to "I wish I had read this sooner" and "I really like the ideas that the authors are presenting." These initial comments, particularly the former two, offered some initial insight into what the book brought forward and what resurged for some students in the course of reading—a challenge to authoritative ways of thinking about epistemology, subjectivity, and pedagogy. For each student, their own history of learning was at work, reanimating and affecting their responses—responses that were conditioned by each student's history of ways of knowing in women's studies.

## Student Responses to *Troubling Women's Studies*

In *Troubling Women's Studies* the authors collectively write about one major concern that unites them: their worry over how the multiple narratives of women's studies are "currently being written out in a number of feminist theorizings, pedagogies, and practices, in favor of singular stories and set meanings" (Braithwaite et al., 2004, 29). Their aim in *Troubling Women's Studies* was not to produce another singular story of the field; rather, "each of our essays takes as its starting point the understanding that there are many Women's Studies and that attending to how a multiplicity of identities and positionalities continually redefines this project called Women's Studies is one of the strengths of the field" (29). In relation to the question of received tradition, the authors are more concerned with critique than with tradition.

But this kind of critique poses difficulties for teaching and learning, particularly for teachers and students who have not had the opportunity to question "singular stories and set meanings." Many find the prospect of multiplicity difficult, perhaps because the prevailing project of education in the contemporary West is marked by an emphasis on the transmission of particular kinds of knowledges, values, and ways of thinking deemed essential and proper for the creation of a responsible, knowing citizen. On an institutional level, schooling, in large part, has performed like this for decades, functioning to "educate," focusing on matters of student discipline (and teacher discipline), instruction, and school structure. One initial student response to *Troubling Women's Studies* reflects these rigid parameters: "I don't understand why we have to read this book and pick apart women's studies like this. What's the point? If we are trying to be a legitimate discipline in the Arts then we should behave like one." Of course, the implication is that to belong, women's studies and most other arts-based disciplines must present a coherent and unified front to the powers that be. The structure of the university demands it of all of us.

In our collective reading project of *Troubling Women's Studies*, I noticed some resistance to the idea of pulling apart and re-theorizing some of the terms that Braithwaite

(2004) highlights in her chapter. For example, the notion of sisterhood has been deconstructed and dismantled by practitioners in women's studies and in feminism for some time, yet, surprisingly, the term continues to animate—even if on a subtle register—the field in ways that are troubling. In a conversation about the importance of pay equity for women, one student said that she felt that feminism had “let go of the struggle” for pay equity, that feminists were no longer concerned with such an issue. She found this particularly troubling, likely because her own work was heading in that direction; she was attached to, and thus deeply interested in, reinvigorating the debate at the social service and governmental level to see women gain equal wages to their male counterparts. By suggesting that feminism had “let go of the struggle” for pay equity, this student not only made her attachments clear, but also alluded to the fact that “we” as feminists should all be concerned and involved in the fight for pay equity. The implication is that we are all, as sisters in the fight, impacted by this, and we ought all to be concerned and active in this particular struggle.

Similarly, there was also desire to pin down and settle the meaning of activism. I remember a conversation between me and another student about rethinking activism in women's studies. For her, activism was about being on the front lines, “doing the hard work on the ground.” When I asked her if she thought that *Troubling Women's Studies* could function to activate change, she mused about the privilege that she felt she had as a graduate student in women's studies—where she could read books and think and write, versus having to “slug it on the streets for women.” Further, she seemed to feel some remorse for not being as active in “the feminist movement” while she has been studying. Perhaps if we had taken the conversation further, we may have come to something else, more in-depth theorization about activism and what it does and does not constitute. But I replay this conversation as a way to highlight the very present dichotomization of terms like activism—either you hit the streets and activate change or you sit behind a desk and study—that do little more than cement them in a

constant either/or meaning as to what counts and what does not count as activism.

Exposing the discourses and contradictions that we are all implicated in can be destabilizing, and the destabilization of the subject is difficult, as is seen in some students' responses to Heald's essay (2004). There were several students in the class who not only questioned, but resisted, the use of autobiography as self indulgent and narcissistic and not within the realm of viable and legitimate research that the university supports. This highlights the power of the received tradition of teaching and learning and research in the university and in women's studies specifically. Also, and as I have already suggested, when some students are faced with confronting their expectations of the discipline, this caused a disruption, perhaps even a crisis in ways of knowing and in the self.

Britzman (1998) sheds light on this by suggesting that in order for learning to occur “the ordinary must be disrupted” (54). If learning, as Felman (in Britzman) suggests, has to deal not so much with lack of knowledge as with resistances to knowledge, then what are we to make of resistance? Resistance “refers to a process of managing psychic conflict” (Pitt 2003, 48), and in this way, our resistances can protect us from having to think otherwise when we cannot. Upfront, Pitt says, resistance may be read as a rejection of new knowledge, but “this ‘no’ conceals a much more ambivalent story of implication in the very knowledge that one is at pains to refuse” (48). Once the course ended and I spent time reflecting on student reactions to the book, I can see that one element of *Troubling Women's Studies*' power is that it articulates the crisis in women's studies and it pushes and advances the arguments, “provoking” the crisis (in the form of resistance?) at the same time as it articulates the crisis. In this sense, it might be said that the book engages in a pedagogy of provocation, a pedagogy explicitly meant to provoke crisis as a form of learning.

There is another matter of pedagogy for me here as well. If I were introducing autobiography again to graduate students, I would consider posing questions throughout the course that ask students to think and talk about how they think their identities as feminists and students of women's studies were formed

and with what results. Moreover, I would ask what were they rewarded for, taught to value, and taught to question—looking back to reframe for the future rather than presenting the students as either with me or not. What this suggests, and what Heald (2004) illuminates, are some of the obstacles in teaching and learning that women's studies and other disciplines interested in social change face. She suggests that "rather than 'passing on' a set of truths or a particular version of our history, Women's Studies needs to interrupt instead of reproduce the theory of the liberal-humanist subject in which our students and our universities [and teachers] are embedded and which enable the continuation of various forms of oppression" (83). As such, the question of how we might imagine new and creative responses to a one-dimensional view of teaching and learning is forever present.

In our collective reading project, one of the students (the one who, three weeks into the term, said that she found the book "boring") engaged *Troubling Women's Studies* on the level of both disciplinarity and personal loss. Upon completing the book, this student said that *Troubling Women's Studies* instilled in her a terror, a troubling of foundations that she was used to relying on. Reading the book, she said, was like finding out that someone she cared about was a fraud. She felt shocked by her own emotional attachment to the discipline and wondered what she gained by making women's studies into this living entity, as her reflection illustrates:

*Women's studies was not just my program or discipline of choice. No, women's studies was something much more to me. It was a little sister who needed to be protected and a mother which I looked to for guidance. A best friend. Saying that women's studies was unstable was like saying my mother was unstable and I could not handle, nor compute that. I had created women's studies into an entity, almost a person, I could relate to. It was someone/something I could love, I could gain strength from, I could shield from nasty misogynists, something I could call home. How could I rip to shreds women's studies when it saved my life? How could I dismantle women's studies when it was a home, and I didn't have a home?*

This student's engagement with *Troubling Women's Studies* was particularly instructive for the ways that her responses shifted from "bored" to "terror" to an openness to questioning her own attachments.

What she reveals, and what I argue *Troubling Women's Studies* illuminates in students, is the strength and power of our attachments to certainty and a received and traditional way of knowing. And here we might consider the stuckness that unresolved grief (melancholia) can incite when we attach so forcefully. The felt effects of unexamined attachment (resistance) can be unifying, but also can lead to aggression. Aggression, Wendy Brown (2006) says, "is what emerges in the space of unmourned losses" (31). Further, the fear of losing coherence and stability stops a deeper reflection on what the struggles are and sends us looking for consistency and stability all over again.

The above example highlights the ways that we get invested in and attached to our own idealized versions of what is right and true about feminism and women's studies, and the ensuing need to trouble those attachments, as this student makes clear. And, again, what is so very difficult about these attachments? In the context of women's studies, it is a separation from the ideals that we hold dear—transformation, certain kinds of political investment and attachment, security, hopes and visions for the future of the field. Idealizing these visions, hopes, and dreams in women's studies, having cherished beliefs called into question, is particularly difficult and may be felt as personal and collective injury. For this reason, we must struggle to understand who we are in relation to faltering foundations. What Rosenberg (2004) and Luhmann (2004) highlight in their essays is that we must see loss as central to women's studies pedagogy. Facing the losses that come with a realization of our investments and attachments to a field—that in many respects shape our identity—becomes central.

In reflecting on investment in and attachment to ideals, one student gestured towards the need for women's studies as a discipline to deal with some difficult issues about the identities that underlie its knowledge production:

*I guess to finish this organized aspect part of my contribution to the talk I just wanted to say people always seem to strive for a black and white viewpoint of the world. And sadly it is often in areas where we really want to make differences and improve lives we get wrapped up in dogmas that do not allow us to really take a look at history. Oppressed histories are often lost because it is people in power who pass them on. But history cannot be erased, and there is only so much remolding that can be done before we merely find ourselves caught up in binds that we are told not to undo for fear of causing major collapse. What I took from this book was the encouragement to try and free myself from these binds. To challenge is not to abandon. It's an attempt to further understand. It's also about learning from our mistakes rather than shamefully hiding from them.*

This student highlights what is at stake in the normative institutional shaping of disciplines, but more, points towards the need to let loss orient our questions of investment and attachment in women's studies. And "*learning from our mistakes instead of shamefully hiding from them*" makes clear the need for a kind of vulnerability that is evoked through a recognition of loss that lets us hear and see more than we might when we work from a place of defensiveness and resistance.

### **The Possibilities of Ambivalence**

In psychoanalytic theory, ambivalence is characterized by contradictory feelings (love and hate) towards a single object. These incongruent feelings experienced at the same time can feel confusing and bothersome, and can lead one to try to resolve the uncertainty that ambivalence manifests in the self. In a world that largely values truth claims and certainty, feelings of ambivalence can be felt as a somewhat unwelcome guest. But Luhmann (2004) illuminates the possibilities of re-orienting ourselves to the productivity of ambivalence:

Psychoanalytic theory suggests that affective ambivalence is an important dynamic in any attachment. If ambivalence is, therefore, the mark of attachment, then we might see ambivalence as a necessary feature of women's studies' ongoing efforts to consolidate and reinvent itself as all

academic fields must do across generations. Given the centrality of ambivalence to attachment, I suggest we make this psychic symptom the site of interest, inquiry and productive reflection, both upon the current state of women's studies and its practitioners. My hope here is that an inquiry into the affective bind between practitioners and the field will help us to understand something about our scholarship, our teaching and ourselves. (152)

If ambivalence is a sign that we are repressing particular desires and wants that constitute our attachments, then ambivalence might be seen as the portal into knowing more about ourselves and the ties that bind us to our beloved ideals. Luhmann says that we must see ambivalence towards women's studies as a possibility for the field, as a necessity in order to revive itself.

As has already been suggested, ambivalence is made possible when we resist the desire to fix and make certain the difficult feelings that ensue from this affective state. For one of the students in our collective reading project, *Troubling Women's Studies* unsettled and provoked a set of questions that she had not thought about before. One of the initial questions that she asked herself in light of the book was: "How did I become feminist?" This question is of particular importance, since what it seems to be asking, more to the point, is how is it that I can subscribe to a field or set of unified theories that I no longer find myself relating to? She documented her responses to the book in a space that she called "notes from the margins." She wrote:

*Reading all this makes me unsure of whether or not I want to continue in the [women's studies] program. What will it mean to have a MWS? Esp. if the program folds? And what if I don't necessarily want to do research focussing on women or gender? I worry about this...where am I? AM I A FEMINIST?*

For this student, clearly, *Troubling Women's Studies* provoked a crisis in learning by bringing to the surface some difficult questions and highlighted her ambivalence towards the project of women's studies. In questioning whether or not she wanted to continue pursuing a graduate degree in the field, she made clear



that she constructed her visions of the self as inextricably intertwined with women's studies as a discipline. Feelings of ambivalence—an affective response rooted in a recognition that something has been lost, whether the idealization of teaching and learning, or of women's studies—might be read as an invitation to ask about one's attachments to particular kinds of knowledges.

The student in our collective reading project who called women's studies her sister, her mother, her best friend submitted a short video for her final project. In it, she reflected upon her attachment to women's studies as a discipline:

*When I dismantle women's studies I dismantle myself. Dismantling women's studies would not allow me concrete theories from which to stand behind or to stand on top of. I would have to look within myself to further understand and problematize...my opinions and my ideas. It's easy to hide behind theory... It's easy to be naked and have something conceal you.*

This particular student was changed by a difficult engagement with loss, facing what it meant for her to attach so completely to particular foundational ideals. And for her, other losses came to the fore, including losses repressed around a recent illness that she had suffered through, and the death of a former lover. She felt that an engagement with her losses (through an inquiry into her own attachments) in women's studies profoundly revealed the extent to which she was suffering. Mourning idealization of the field as mother, sister, best friend, along with other losses, gave this student a sense of relief that she had not felt before. For this student, her reading of *Troubling Women's Studies* and subsequent reflection on the ideas within, initiated a process that she required to begin healing herself. What she makes explicit here is the reparative power of loss, loss as a disruption *and* reconstitution of subjectivity.

### Conclusion

*Troubling Women's Studies* has animated my teaching through its demand for reflexivity and curiosity in relation to unsettling foundations and paying attention to the difficulties that come with the feelings of loss

that are attached to those foundations. Unquestioned attachment to foundations forces defensiveness when our identities are called into question and our defenses incite anger and aggression, violence and pain. To understand one's self and the world around us is an ethical demand for the teacher and the student, and this is what the book has brought to me as a teacher, and why I bring *Troubling Women's Studies* to students—to incite reflection and self understanding of one's self and the positions one takes up in the name of coherent identities. *Troubling Women's Studies* pushes and advances its arguments about knowledge production, pedagogy, and subjectivity and has the potential to mobilize a crisis or undoing in the self. This latter possibility is what makes the book a particularly interesting pedagogical text. It "provokes" the crisis as it also articulates it. The students' responses demonstrate this. Recalling Britzman (1998) again, "for there to be learning, there must be a conflict in learning" (54). This is one of the transformative effects of the book—that it provokes learning.

Finally, the book frames the importance of attending to losses in women's studies and teaching and learning: foundational ideals (empowerment, experience, unity) and the loss of those ideals, and the loss of a particular kind of feminist education. Turning towards these losses signals a realization that such notions can be limiting, but is also the impetus for re-building women's studies, re-building/re-making the field in an attempt to let go, move through the losses, to mourn and then to re-make meaning; this is what *Troubling Women's Studies* makes possible. Recalling Rosenberg, letting loss orient pedagogy creates possibilities for questioning identity formation and knowledge-making practices and is impetus for rethinking and recreating the field of women's studies.

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